

***“To What Are We Called?”***  
***First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto***  
***A Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon***  
***on 22 November 2015***

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

How many of you remember several years ago when the dowdy Scottish singer Susan Boyle appeared on the programme *Britain’s Got Talent* and surprised the world with her amazing rendition of “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Miserables*? Within seconds of her starting to sing members of the audience rose to their feet. The seemingly awkward middle-aged woman came alive in that moment. Her face brightened, and she sang with even more passion, vigour, and clarity.

Millions watched the YouTube video of her performance, and she went on to have a very successful career. Prior to her appearance on the show Boyle had mostly only sung in her local Catholic church and in pubs in her village. She’d been quietly pursuing her calling as a soprano, taking vocal lessons and performing in small venues. She was dedicated and faithful to it and kept singing and hoping for a breakthrough after her mother died a few years earlier. Boyle was 47 by the time the world recognized her talent. A lot hinged on that moment. The audience and judges could easily have swung the other way. Would Boyle still have remained true to her call if that had happened? I think so. She was singing for her mother, whom she took care of until she died in 2007 at age 91 and who always told her daughter to do what made her happy.

Feeling called can be both thrilling and terrifying. Sometimes there’s a certain ambivalence that comes along with a call. It involves the unknown and making a choice to follow it or to ignore it and let it go. Resisting a call can be risky, however.

*When we think we've been called, how do we know how to respond?* It's important to listen to what we're hearing inside, and that's an ongoing spiritual practice. Henri Nouwen calls this our "inner voice of love." As he urges, "[Y]ou know that God speaks to you through your inner voice and that you will find joy and peace *only* if you follow it."<sup>1</sup> We have to trust in that. Similarly, Quaker teacher Parker Palmer talks about vocation as coming from deep inside, "calling [us] to be the [people] [we] were born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given [us] at birth by God."<sup>2</sup>

The great theologian Howard Thurman famously wrote, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that because *that's* what the world needs, people who have come alive."

There's something beautiful about having found your calling. It's like coming home. If you're lucky, you find a way to live in accord with your inner truth, and it feels right.

Ideally we'd all manage to lead the "undivided life" that Parker Palmer writes about, in which our inner selves were in sync with the outward lives we live. He claims that "true vocation" joins self and service, citing writer Frederick Buechner's famous line about "that place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>3</sup> I've always loved this quote and find it especially relevant to the formation of Unitarian Universalist identity.

***"[I]t is important that awake people be awake." (William Stafford)***

It may come as a surprise to you, but I became a Unitarian Universalist while really angry. The year was 2002, and I wanted to join various progressive groups working to stop the George W. Bush administration from going to war in Iraq. I needed that outlet. I loved that I could join members of my Brooklyn congregation on numerous anti-war marches in New York City and in Washington. I was so proud to walk with them behind our church's banner. I really felt that we were living out our values. I felt alive and

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<sup>1</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) 89.

<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Basset, 2000) 10.

<sup>3</sup> Parker, 16.

connected to something greater. In the words of our hymn today, “Web of Life...help me bear witness to all I believe. Justice be my guide as I seek my way...speak through me in all I do and say.” Back then there was no doubt in my mind that we were a People of Integrity.

Of course the times were very different, but I imagined that I felt something like what Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed describes in his new book *The Selma Awakening* as the experience of some of the courageous Unitarians who marched in Selma 50 years ago:

For this group of UUs, Selma was memorable because there they experienced what it felt like to be whole, rather than experiencing the different aspects of the self as at odds with one another. The barriers of race and class, head and heart, were breached. Selma was about being in authentic relationship to one’s values, promises, and hopes, and honoring them by committing one’s life even unto death.<sup>4</sup>

My experiences marching with my church community, while nowhere near as dangerous, were also transformative and bound me more tightly to the UU movement.

In preparation for writing this, I listened again to Cornel West’s powerful 2015 Ware Lecture, which he gave last June at the UU General Assembly in Portland. How many of you heard it? He praises Unitarian Universalists for their commitment to intellectual integrity and unarmed truth as well as their authenticity of spirit. It’s interesting that his focus is the same as our theme this month—integrity. West defines integrity as “the quality of your courage and your willingness to bear witness radically against the grain even if you have to sacrifice something precious.”<sup>5</sup> Citing the late work of WEB DuBois, West emphasizes the values of integrity, honesty, decency, and virtue in the face of catastrophe and calls for a moral and spiritual awakening in this “age of mendacity.” Having had him as a professor at Union Theological Seminary, I’m not surprised that he insists on humility and the need for us to choose to learn from and sing the blues. This means continuing to love and to somehow find courage despite the catastrophe.

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, “Selma’s Challenge,” *UU World*, Winter 2014: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/selmas-challenge>.

<sup>5</sup> Cornel West, 2015 Ware Lecture at UU General Assembly In Portland, Oregon: <http://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/ga/ware-west>.

Right now, in the wake of the very recent violent attacks in Paris, Beirut, Baghdad, and Mali, we're witnessing an ugly backlash that's full of xenophobia, fear-mongering, and hate against Muslims. In my native US, various Republican governors are proposing that their states stop accepting refugees, and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has even gone so far as to make the frightening proposal that Muslim Americans be forced to wear ID badges reminiscent of the ones Jews were required to wear in Nazi Germany. Here in Ontario there have been a few instances of hate crimes against Muslims in the last few days.

Now I know that as Unitarian Universalists we won't sit idly by as our Muslim brothers and sisters are treated with anything less than the inherent worth and dignity they are entitled to as human beings in this democratic province. We will speak out against these hateful acts, we will straighten our backs up, as Cornel West puts it, we will not tolerate this. May we have the courage to love even more. May we find ways to expand our hearts and stretch out our hands to our neighbours in even more radical ways. Let us not be afraid...

But how can we do this? We can engage in activism of varying sorts—demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, phone calls to elected officials, etc. As a congregation Toronto First can continue supporting the Syrian Refugee project wholeheartedly. We can amp up our fundraising and expressions of generosity. We can continue fostering friendships and building new bridges with Muslim communities. With all of this we can shatter fear with love.

Thankfully there are glimmers of hope coming from individuals as well as our spiritual leaders and elected officials: French President Francois Hollande has just promised to increase the number of refugees France will take in from what it promised back in September (30,000 over the next two years). A group of mayors of major American cities have responded to the xenophobic governors by declaring that they'll accept more refugees. And in a statement released on Thursday, UUA President Peter Morales called efforts to bar Syrian refugees from the United States "unconscionable."

Toronto First's current vision statement begins with the words, "Committed to love and justice." Maintaining this commitment is our call, and we must stay awake to the current catastrophe. What I'm proposing this morning is that while our aspiration will always be to strive towards the Beloved Community, this will take different forms for each one of us, depending on the moment, and that's OK. The world needs our prophetic responses filled with moral outrage, but these responses should be spiritually grounded. That means that some of us will become full-fledged activists and social justice leaders, while others of us will pull back in order to protect ourselves and our own needs. (It's important to recall that not all of the Unitarian ministers who were invited to join the march in Selma went. They had their different reasons for staying home.)

I'm thinking of an unusually outspoken activist friend of mine from Union who declared on her Facebook wall the other day that all she wished for right now was silence and prayer. She's sick of all the reactivity out there, especially in the media. Maybe you're feeling similarly overwhelmed and exhausted by the endless media blitz. Maybe what you need is a break from it all.

Pause and allow yourself to listen to your inner voice first. What feels right to you now? What actions can you take in response to the current catastrophe that will connect your head with your heart and make you feel most whole? Come back to the image of Susan Boyle's beautiful aliveness as she bravely sang before those snarky judges and—as it turned out—the world.

Where is your most authentic self calling you to serve with maximum aliveness? You may absolutely feel drawn to join street protests and participate in other overt forms of social action in response to the racism and Islamophobia we're witnessing. But for others that inner voice may be guiding you to retrench and focus more on relationships with your family and friends.

This is a spiritual journey we're all on. Remember that you're not alone. This community stands with you and bolsters you in your discernment. Know that you're part of a long tradition of justice makers and social reformers. The

moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us be faithful to our call—both individually and collectively. Blessed be and amen.